

THE 3 KINDS OF WAR IN VIETNAM

As war crisis nears in Vietnam—

This analysis of the military choices U. S. faces is by Maj. Gen. Max S. Johnson (Ret.), former planner for Joint Chiefs of Staff, now on the staff of "U. S. News & World Report."

Events are moving now toward a military showdown in Vietnam—with a decision to be made by combat.

The question at this time is whether the coming crisis will be resolved in South, middle or North Vietnam.

As the showdown approaches, the U. S. finds itself involved in three forms of war in Southeast Asia:

- An antiguerrilla war in southern South Vietnam.
- A base-defense war in northern South Vietnam.
- An antilogistics war in southern North Vietnam.

These three dissimilar wars are all part of one conflict, that against the Communist aggression directed from Hanoi. They are the result of the changing nature of enemy operations now in South Vietnam.

While guerrilla-type operations continue in the South, other Communist Viet Cong units are regrouping for offensive moves against targets in the northern part of South Vietnam. They are being reinforced by organized units of the North Vietnamese Army and equipped by arms from the North—both men and arms infiltrated around the border through Laos.

The objective could be any of the following:

1. To seize the air and naval bases in northern South Vietnam from which U. S. and South Vietnamese operations against North Vietnam are mounted. Or—

2. To take from the rear the South Vietnamese forces now defending the line of demarkation between North and South, for easier invasion from the North. Or—

3. To sever ground communications between the northern part of South Vietnam and the rest of the country, perhaps as a preliminary to direct invasion.

Eleven years ago, the French were humiliated before the world and driven from Southeast Asia by their defeat at Dienbienphu. The Red-directed part of the Vietnamese that forced this French surrender is the same enemy U. S. faces there today. This enemy can be expected to do its utmost to defeat, humiliate and drive out the U. S.

Stopping the enemy. What, then, can stop this enemy? There are three possible ways: defeat at the spot . . . defeat en route to the spot . . . defeat at home.

Defeat at the spot, where Red forces attack in South Vietnam, might be accomplished with tactical nuclear weapons. Significantly, the 8-inch howitzers just sent in to support the U. S. marines at Danang can fire nuclear as well as conventional warheads.

Defeat of the enemy en route to his target area in South Vietnam, in turn, could be accomplished most effectively by throwing a solid American military cordon across the panhandle of Laos—the Red route of infiltration. This might require from three to six U. S. divisions.

Instead of a solid cordon of U. S. troops, a nuclearized zone across the Laotian panhandle might also prevent the southward movement of Red forces.

But both of these courses of action are politically unacceptable to many Americans at the present time.

Gen. Max S. Johnson (Ret.)

This leaves one more means of stopping the enemy en route before he reaches South Vietnam in force—namely the destruction of enemy military supplies inside North Vietnam. That is the present course.

Interdiction of the flow of supplies is being accomplished to some degree by air power. Enemy ammunition depots and staging areas in southern North Vietnam are bombed. Important bridges are blown up. Railway engines and cars are attacked with rockets. Traffic on the important coastal highway is shot up by U. S. planes. But whether these actions can stymie a Red attack is questionable.

Defeat of the enemy at home, the final major course of action, could come from stepped-up conventional air attacks, from invasion, or from nuclear attack.

At present, U. S. and South Vietnamese air attacks have been confined to military targets only. All-out air attacks, if ordered, would add cities and industrial targets to that list.

Bombardment or invasion? Bringing an enemy to its knees by air bombardment is the modern substitute for the time-honored method of conquest—invasion. But if this conventional bombing did not lead the enemy to surrender, it could become necessary to resort to invasion or nuclear bombardment.

Invasion of North Vietnam, if preferred to nuclear bombardment, could demand a major U. S. effort. And if the Communist Chinese decided to come into the war in earnest, the U. S. effort would have to be tremendous.

American troops would have to go in. There is really no other force available to invade the Red River Delta—the heart of North Vietnam. This is true even though Chiang Kai-shek and his Chinese Nationalists have a reservoir of 600,000 trained forces on Formosa. Their introduction into Vietnam would offend and frighten all U. S. allies and potential allies in Southeast Asia. And they might better be used elsewhere—to take the island of Hainan, off the south coast of China, for example.

The U. S. today has on active duty 16 Army divisions and three Marine divisions. Of this force, some eight divisions are already deployed overseas. About half of the others are earmarked and equipped to defend Europe, cannot safely be sent elsewhere.

This leaves four active Army divisions, two Marine divisions and some unready reserve divisions to undertake any invasion of North Vietnam, to hold South Korea or Thailand if they are then attacked by Red China, and to buttress further any defense against Russia if it should move in turn against the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The big bomb. Because of this limited force available for any invasion, the U. S. might give consideration to the controlled use of nuclear bombing of North Vietnam on a selective basis, with advance notice to civilians to evacuate target areas. The threat alone might bring the quick surrender of Hanoi. If not, loss of a city or two almost certainly would. But that might give the Chinese Reds an excuse to move into Vietnam.

Nuclear bombing is not a welcome course of action. But neither is any of the alternatives, including a U. S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia—the equivalent of a U. S. surrender.

These are the military moves, in brief, that U. S. planners now must choose from so long as the enemy insists upon a military showdown in Vietnam.

U.S. News & World Report

OldMagazineArticles.com